

Masculinity Threat, Misogyny, and the Celebration of Violence in White Men

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to understand the relationship between masculinity and the endorsement of attitudes towards guns and violence and aggressive fantasies. I examine threatened masculinity and masculine gender role stress in addition to a newly developed measure, which assesses traits associated with incels, who believe that social liberalism, feminism, and more sexually active men (“Chads”) are to blame for their lack of sex with women. Incels are largely a disorganized group of men interacting online, but a few self-identifying members have been associated with a number of mass violence events in recent years. The data were constructed from an original self-report survey distributed to men aged 18 to 30 years old, the group most responsible for violence against women and mass violence. I hypothesize that men who perceive that men are losing status as a group (status threat) (1), who feel less acceptance as members of that category (acceptance threat) (2), or who exhibit incel traits (3) are more likely to (a) approve of guns, violence, and aggression, and (b) exhibit aggressive fantasies. This study’s findings support three hypotheses: status threat is positively associated with an approval of guns and violence; acceptance threat is positively associated with approval of guns, violence, and aggressive fantasies; and incel traits are positively associated with aggressive fantasies. Men who experience status or acceptance threat or share incel traits exemplify issues of toxicity present in masculinity today. Their support for gun use, violence and aggressive fantasies further show the connection between male insecurity, aggressive attitudes, and fantasizing about violence.

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## **GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT**

This study aims to understand the relationship between masculinity and the endorsement of attitudes towards guns and violence and aggressive fantasies. I examine masculinity and feelings of threat in addition to a newly developed measure, which assesses traits associated with incels (“involuntary celibates”), who believe that social liberalism, feminism, and more sexually active men are to blame for their lack of sex with women. Incels are largely a disorganized group of men interacting online, but a few self-identifying members have been associated with a number of mass violence events in recent years. The data were constructed from a survey distributed to men aged 18 to 30 years old, the group most responsible for violence against women and mass violence. I hypothesize that men who perceive that men are losing status as a group (1), who feel less acceptance as members of that category (2), or who exhibit incel traits (3) are more likely to (a) approve of guns, violence, and aggression, and (b) exhibit aggressive fantasies. This study’s findings support three hypotheses: feelings of group status loss are positively associated with an approval of guns and violence; stress in one’s masculine gender role is positively associated with approval of guns, violence, and aggressive fantasies; and incel traits are positively associated with aggressive fantasies. Their support for gun use, violence and aggressive fantasies further show the connection between male insecurity, aggressive attitudes, and fantasizing about violence.

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After the second wave of feminism began in the 1960's when women pushed back against institutionalized sexism, many men throughout America felt that their roles were under threat from women's empowerment. Some countered with a brand of the Men's Rights Movement (MRM), which focused on how men have also been disadvantaged in our society, for example in child custody, by false rape accusations and by government programs that only benefit women (Messner 1998). As internet use spread, the MRM went digital, creating a "manosphere...an informal cyberspace network of blogs, websites, and forums that concentrate on issues concerning men and masculinity—issues as diverse as men's rights, the male sex role, sex and relationships with women, the economy and feminism" (Lilly 2016:1). It has lasted through the decades and still focuses on the same issues today.

In a parallel development, the term "involuntary celibate" was coined on the website "Alana's Involuntary Celibate Project" in 1993. The site was created by a bisexual woman named Alana (no full name attributed) to explore her personal experiences with rigid gender norms and how these have resulted in her inability to find love (Baker 2016). This forum allowed many people to comment and discuss shared feelings of loneliness. This community was studied by Donnelly and colleagues (2001) in the 1990's, utilizing a life-course analysis. They defined "involuntary celibate" as: "one who desires to have sex, but has been unable to find a willing partner for at least 6 months prior to being surveyed" (2001:159). They describe the community as inclusive for heterosexuals, bisexuals, etc. and included both partnered and unpartnered people (2001:159). Some reasons given for celibacy in their review of online celibate communities included: chronic illnesses, recent childbirth, pregnancy, unhappiness in marriage, increased age, lack of shared activity, etc. (2001:161). This group used the internet as a means of moral support to fill their emotional needs that otherwise remain unfulfilled (2001:167).

By contrast, today's incel group is less focused on emotional support and more about scapegoating: they blame feminism for their celibacy, claiming that women are genetically inferior, or that women prefer more "genetically superior" men, etc. (Ging 2017). While the "involuntary celibate" members studied by Donnelly et al. (2001) felt unfulfilled and dissatisfied with their sex lives, the current incel members turn this into misogyny and hate directed outward towards others. There is no apparent overlap between the community studied by Donnelly et al. (2001) and the current incel community, except that they share a desire to be sexually active. Rather, it seems likely that, as the "manosphere" developed, a small sect took form under the shorthand name "incel."

Understanding this small sect is extremely important due to their association with high profile mass violence. On May 23, 2014, the self-identified incel Elliot Rodger in his "Day of Retribution" killed six and wounded fourteen (BBC 2018). As a response to this and other acts of violence, Reddit in November 2017 banned the "r/incel" community page for "hosting violent content" (Bell 2017). At the time it was banned, the "r/incel" page had over 40,000 community members (Bell 2017). Rodger has since inherited the title of "incel hero" online, receiving praise from a community that shares his resentment of women and those who engage in sex (BBC 2018). One such supporter is Alek Minassian, who on April 23, 2018 ran his van into a crowd in Toronto, Canada killing ten and injuring fifteen. In a Facebook post before the attack, he said in part: "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacy's! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" (Wendling 2018).

The most recent instance of incel gun violence was perpetrated by Scott Paul Beierle on November 2, 2018. Beierle posed as a customer of a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida and then shot and killed two women, and wounded five others. Beierle expressed incel sentiments in

videos about women and their lack of understanding about the “societal pressure that’s put on an adolescent male” (Chavez and McLaughlin 2018). Beierle was also sympathetic toward Rodger and his frustrations.

This movement sparked my own research in which I focus on the following questions: Do men who believe the status of men is threatened (status threat) or exhibit stress in their gender role (acceptance threat) share beliefs with members of the incel movement? In other words, do they have more aggressive fantasies and a greater acceptance of violence? I will assess these questions by analyzing whether men who hold traits common among self-proclaimed incels or who believe their masculinity is under threat have higher rates of support for gun use, aggression, and violence. Framing my hypotheses in social identity theory (SIT) and group position theory, I surveyed men using self-reported survey items, which could be quantitatively analyzed. The findings will provide a deeper understanding of masculinity threat and its relationship to violence vis-à-vis gender-role stress.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

In this literature review, I outline how the theoretical framings of social identity theory, Blumer’s (1958) group position theory, and gender identity threat literature help to understand the relationship between toxic masculinity and its consequences. The incel movement is a primary example of the harmful relationships between threat and violence because as the community feels threatened, they respond by celebrating and joking about violence against women (Ging 2017; Lilly 2016). Situating the concept of toxic masculinity within the theoretical framework of threat and identity allows for a thorough examination of aggression and violence, as seen in the incel movement.

## **Understanding Identity**

Social identity theory (SIT) argues that self-concepts derive from membership in social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Memberships provide value and emotional significance to an individual's self-concepts, such that people work hard to maintain membership in their social groups (Tajfel 1981:239; Burn, Aboud, and Moyles 2000). Through social categorization, people divide individuals into groups, seeing the world in terms of "us" versus "them." Maintaining this group membership is important because status and power is gained through associations with these groups.

SIT is limited in its ability to explain how categorization might lead to conflict between in-groups and out-groups. Therefore, I supplement it with Blumer's (1958) theory of group position. Blumer argues that in order for individuals to be prejudiced towards others, they must first recognize and categorize themselves into groups in relation to others (Bobo 1999). However, Blumer diverges from SIT when he adds the element of social positioning between groups. His theory premises that if a group perceives their privileges and resources to be in jeopardy, then they will feel threatened. Such threat will lead to conflict between the ingroup and the group perceived to be taking their resources. This theory is traditionally utilized to explain dominant group threat, where the conflict often results in the dominant group becoming more hostile to maintain their position at the top (Branscombe et al. 1999; Bobo 1999).

While Blumer (1958) and the empirical extensions of Bobo (1999) look primarily at threat in regard to racial prejudice, this framework can also be applied to theories of gender identity and masculinity threat. A perceived threat to a self-identified male's gender identity could result in a defensive reaction known as masculinity threat. Scholars have demonstrated that men who experience gender identity threat try to hyper-conform to masculine identity traits and

show more anger and aggression towards women (Willer et al. 2013; Munsch and Willer 2012; Dahl, Vescio, and Weaver 2015; Eisler, Franchina, Moore, Honeycutt, and Rhatigan 2000). Such research and its relationship to larger issues within hegemonic and toxic masculinity are further explored in the following sections.

### *Group position and threat.*

Group position theory (GPT) is based on social position and the hierarchy between groups (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999). Building on conflict and intergroup social comparison, Blumer (1958) outlines four feelings in the dominant group, which could lead to racial prejudice: a feeling of superiority, the belief that the subordinate group is intrinsically different, a claim to areas of privilege, and a fear of threat from the subordinate group who desire the dominant group's advantages. Blumer (1958:4) notes that group positions operate on the domination and subordination of lower status groups, thereby including certain people and excluding others. While Blumer (1958) mainly uses his framework for racial prejudice, it can be applied to many group hierarchies based on group identities.

This group hierarchy is seen in intergroup conflict where there is an unequal distribution of resources that results in a struggle between dominant and subordinate groups (Bobo 1999). The idea that social resources are finite leads the ingroup to believe it is at risk, resulting in the ingroup perceiving the outgroup as a threat (Bobo 1999). As noted above, Blumer (1958) argues racial prejudice is rooted in a feeling of entitlement to certain privileges and resources among the dominant group. Furthermore, the dominant group fears the subordinate group is planning to take the resources from them (4). This leads to a perception of threat in the dominant group: they see themselves at risk of losing their social resources to subordinate groups. Harmless acts and arbitrary movements are then perceived as an attack or seen as the subordinate group "getting out

of place” (Blumer 1958:4). The threat of competition can lead to conflict between groups where ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation are important for the maintenance of group status.

There are different types of threat depending on the type of conflict, either intergroup conflict or intragroup conflict. Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1999) outline four types of social identity threat: categorization threat, distinctiveness threat, status threat (or value threat), and acceptance threat. Status threat is the sense that the group’s value is undermined by outside sources. Acceptance threat is the sense of rejection and derogation from others for not truly belonging to the ingroup. Acceptance threat involves reacting to an internal threat from the group (doubting your standing in the ingroup), while status threat is reacting to a (perceived) outside threat to the group (men as a whole are threatened by reduction of their status as men). For this project, I will be focusing on these two types of threat: status and acceptance threat.

*Gender identity theory and masculinity threat.*

In this thesis, I apply these broader theories of threat to masculine gender identity, and their reactions to internal and external group threats. When male gender identity is called into question, researchers have found that men will agree with traditional gender roles overcompensating to appear more masculine (Munsch and Willer 2012; Willer et al. 2013). This form of acceptance threat includes displays of toughness, aggression, lack of empathy, devaluation of women, need for respect, competitiveness, and homophobia (Bird 1996; Kupers 2005; Harris 2010; Harris, Palmer and Struve 2011; Dahl et al. 2015). In Munsch and Willer’s (2012) study, they provided false feedback about participants’ gender identities and then asked their views on an incident of sexual assault. They found that men whose gender identities were threatened were more likely to exonerate the perpetrators and condemn the victims of sexual assault (1134). By experiencing a threat to their gender identities, men felt the need to

overcorrect their ingroup identity to be truly accepted. This is an example of acceptance threat where the men in the study perceive a threat to their ingroup identity and react by supporting their ingroup more (through exonerating the perpetrators), and rejecting the outgroup (women, who are the victims).

Furthermore, when individuals feel their group they are a part of is threatened, they may respond by emphasizing their status as members of the ingroup. Willer et al. (2013) test the masculine overcompensation thesis, which asserts that men who hold the belief that the status or position of men in society is under threat, they will react with extreme displays of masculinity. When compared against women, Willer et al. (2013) found that men were the only ones affected by a gender identity threat, and responded by supporting violence in war, and displayed homophobia and misogyny. By experiencing a status threat to their ingroup identity, they “hyper-conformed” to ingroup traits (Branscombe et al. 1999:55). This threat forces men to question their dominant group privilege when it becomes apparent that men hold a social position over women. Blumer (1958) describes how this sort of challenge to their authority results in a defensive reaction to “preserve the integrity and the position of the dominant group” (5). Even if a man has low status within his group, he can still feel superior to those in subordinate groups (i.e. women).

#### *Attributions of responsibility and blame.*

We also see group position conflicts through research on attributions, which looks at respondents’ assignment of cause and effect relationships to various situations. In studies on reactions to accounts of date rape and sexual coercion, attribution researchers ask respondents to assign responsibility to the actions of victims and perpetrators. These studies include vignettes that present scenarios of date rape or sexual coercion, and respondents assign responsibility to

each character in the story. Attribution research on gender focuses on how women and men assign responsibility to themselves and to the opposite gender. Through strong ingroup ties and outgroup derogation, men can reinforce their superiority and privilege (Cameron and Lalonde 2001; Cameron 2001). This finding demonstrates the need to consider how attribution literature allows us to better understand the notion of threat.

Recent studies show that more men assign blame to the victim in situations of date rape and sexual coercion, and find the perpetrator more justified in his actions than women respondents (Munsch and Willer 2012; Workman and Freeburg 1999; Donovan 2007). Men with strong ingroup ties perceive greater status threats than men with weaker ties (Cameron 2001; Burn et al. 2000). Such studies also found that men who defined themselves in terms of their gender do not think women as a group are disadvantaged, but instead perceived themselves as being discriminated against for being men (Cameron 2001). Further, men who scored higher on a gender identity scale (had stronger male group ties) were less likely to identify as feminists or align themselves with women (Burn et al. 2000). Such studies also found that men whose gender identity is threatened show greater support for war, greater interest in purchasing a sports utility vehicle, and display more negative views of homosexuality (Willer et al. 2013). This group membership of “men” contributes to their self-esteem and overall self-concept. By derogating women and overcompensating, they further reinforce their status within the dominant ingroup.

### **Notions of Masculinity**

One’s self concept and self-esteem is tied to many identities and the social status of identities like race, class, (dis)ability, etc. shapes how you live and present yourself. This is especially evident in how our society categorizes gender. By categorizing ourselves and others, we immediately create distinctions (e.g., male/female) and position ourselves in a hierarchy

based on group identity. Masculinity is a gender performance that conveys one's social identity to others, but hegemonic masculinity is the hierarchy operating at the societal level. It is defined as a "pattern of practice" in which men perpetuate and remain in power over women and subordinated masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832). There are multiple forms of masculinity and they are all socially constructed; however, they are not all valued and treated as hegemonic (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele 2015:10-12). Connell (1987) argues that hegemonic masculinity works in two ways: one, through the domination of women, and two, through the hierarchy of intermale dominance. There are many types of accepted masculinities, but hegemonic masculinity suggests that they all reinforce male dominance and higher position of power in society. Here I explore how masculinity that is framed as the absence of femininity and intermale dominance work to preserve and ultimately reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

*Masculinity in relation to women.*

An important aspect of hegemonic masculinity is how it is defined by the absence of femininity (Harris et al. 2011; Heinrich 2012; Limmer 2014). With less value placed on women's contributions in our society, exhibiting traditionally feminine traits paints men as un-masculine or "gay" (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, and Weinberg 2007). Expressing emotions and feelings that make men appear "weak," like empathy and care, are often associated with femininity (Kupers 2005:716). To be seen as "tough" involves emotional self-control on the part of men (Vokey, Tefft and Tysiaczny 2013). Being a man is seen as the antithesis of being a woman: men are supposed to be "strong" and "tough," while women are supposed to be "nurturing" and "family-oriented" (Knudson 2014:123). Societal gender roles encourage men to fill the "breadwinner" role, while women are expected to be the "nurturing mother." With the reinforcement of gender roles, hegemonic masculinity discourages men from showing femininity

in their roles at home, at work, and even in social circles. If they do not ascribe to these traditional gender roles, men are called out as being “less of a man.” As for women, if they are perceived to be stepping outside of their traditional gender role, they are seen as treading on men’s territory, representing a threat to male status (Knudson 2014).

Another important aspect of hegemonic masculinity is the objectification of women. Part of the expectation of what it means to “be a man” is to be sexually experienced and to not show emotional intimacy. This can be seen in Limmer’s (2014) work where she interviewed secondary school-age boys about their sexual risk taking. In addition to distinguishing their masculinities in opposition to women, they asserted their power by labeling women as “dirty” or “clean” based on their number of sexual partners (Limmer 2014). Such labeling is known to lead to more calloused attitudes towards women (Vokey et al. 2013:568). This is seen in much of the literature on hegemonic masculinity: objectifying women is a form of competition, helping to maintain status within the male friend group (Bird 1996).

#### *Intermale dominance.*

A prominent aspect of intermale dominance in hegemonic masculinity is the need for competitiveness. This can occur in sports, the pursuit of women, or amongst friend groups (Bird 1996). The need to be competitive plays a significant role in men’s self-conceptualization because competition with other men helps foster this need to dominate. In sports and competition, Bird (1996) found that men compared other men to women, criticizing their lack of acceptance and understanding of the intensity of the game. When competitiveness becomes extreme and reaches a degree of ruthlessness, it becomes more toxic (Kupers 2005). Competition is seen in many areas of hegemonic masculinity, as it is a defining characteristic of self-conceptualization of the male identity.

One way men compete with one another is by posturing, or putting on the appearance of a “cool pose” for other men in order to maintain their masculine status (Harris et al. 2011). Masculinity is seen as a performance where the display of masculine traits is a way to reduce ridicule and command respect (Harris 2010; Heinrich 2012). Men often use behaviors like abusing alcohol, objectifying women and pursuing sex as a means to appear more masculine (Harris 2010). There is a component of fear associated with men’s desire to display masculinity: men fear ridicule and disrespect from others, and therefore avoid the potential for those behaviors by posturing (Heinrich 2012).

This fear is known to be a cause of “hypermasculine posturing and violence” (Kupers 2005:17). The male prisoners in Kupers’ (2005) research indicated that they engage in such behavior “to merely stay alive and protect their honor” (2005:17). These men feel their only means of survival in prison is to put on a “tough-guy” exterior. The repeated need to be respected by other men can quickly devolve into toxic masculine behaviors when it reaches the point of violence and social destruction. In hegemonic masculinity, however, maintaining respect, confidence, and physical stature is necessary to avoid ridicule and embarrassment from others (Harris 2010). This is the way men use respect and the performance of “toughness” to display their compliance with society’s meaning of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Exaggerations of Gender Identity**

Not only are there different types of masculinity, but there are also different ways it is exaggerated. Hypermasculinity is the excessiveness of hegemonic traits—aggression, toughness, strength, competitiveness, etc., while toxic masculinity refers to destructive forms of the gender identity (Harris et al. 2011:53). Hypermasculinity can be seen in the media through advertisements, commercials, television shows, and movies, often giving audiences an unrealistic

expectation of what it means to be a man. In Vokey et al.'s (2013) research, they explored how men accepted hypermasculine characteristics found in magazine advertisements, breaking down hypermasculinity into four themes: "toughness as emotional self-control," "danger as exciting," "violence as manly," and "calloused attitudes towards women and sex" (Vokey et al. 2013:563). The media and what we see in our everyday lives utilize these hypermasculine ideals as a way to sell products. These products supposedly help men achieve an image of what it means to be a "real man." Individual men can become disillusioned by this ideal and internalize these excessive traits to the point that it becomes toxic.

Hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity both reflect societal expectations set for men. Toxic masculinity, however, takes it one step further. Kupers identifies toxic masculinity as the "construct[ion]...of those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that foster domination of others and are, thus, socially destructive" (2005:717). Two aspects that distinguish toxic masculinity from hegemonic and hypermasculinity are the intense need for control and power, and the harming of oneself and others by being socially destructive. These traits may overlap with the ideas of hegemonic masculinity and the dominating social position of men. However, it is important to note that when these traits become extreme, they reach a point where they escalate to forms of violence.

One critical element that sets toxic masculinity apart from hegemonic and hypermasculinity is the extreme demand for power, control and domination. This is different from hegemonic masculinity because hegemonic masculinity is the systemic domination of men over women, while toxic masculinity reflects the individual's need for control that becomes exaggerated to a point of obsession (Kupers 2005:717). Traits that may reflect this need for power and control are competition and the need for respect. Kupers (2005:717) found in his

study of prisoners that they would do anything to maintain respect, even to the point of committing violent crimes that would put them behind bars. This is an example of how hegemonic masculinity can be destructive at the individual and interpersonal level. Male prisoners in Kupers' study feel they must follow the "real men" code which extends these hegemonic traits to the point of self-destruction (Kupers 2005:718).

Often this need to dominate and control others is expressed as violence because aggression and lack of empathy are encouraged in hegemonic masculinity. These forms of violence—violence against women, violence against other men, and violence against oneself—reflect a negative self-image and feelings of powerlessness when trying to conform to masculinity (Kaufman 1987; Eisler et al. 2000). Kaufman (1987) describes this phenomenon as "surplus aggression," where instead of expressing emotions, men repress them until they are transformed into a surplus of aggression and anger (4). Any pain or feeling of powerlessness cannot be expressed, and instead is used to reinforce the hegemonic masculine identity (Kaufman 1987). This can often result in violence, in addition to issues of emotional openness and self-awareness (Kaufman 1987; Knudson 2014). This need to prove one's masculinity is often the cause of violence where men are attempting to show they are strong as a way of demanding respect.

Another important feature of toxic masculinity is how masculinity can become socially destructive, either to oneself or to others. This can be different from physical violence in that it focuses more on emotional detachment. Masculinity emphasizes a lack of emotion, but toxic masculinity reaches the point of insensitivity and a lack of consideration for the experiences and feelings of others (Kupers 2005). Kupers (2005) found this among the prisoners in his study: their "code" emphasized not displaying any weakness of any kind, not displaying emotions other

than anger, not depending on anyone, and not showing vulnerability. All of these are very strict and extreme expectations. This is where it becomes socially destructive: men feel they cannot express emotions like empathy and caring for others, since they would be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Instead, they bottle the emotions up and then lash out through what are deemed to be more appropriate displays of masculinity like violence and aggression.

### **Masculinity and Mass Shootings**

Mass shootings have become part of a familiar cycle in the U.S.: shootings occur; they become the focus of widespread alarm; debates on gun legislation lead to little action; killers' means and motives receive sustained attention; and then more mass shootings devastate the country, maintaining the cycle. Eighteen of the thirty deadliest shootings in the U.S. since 1949 have occurred within the last ten years (CNN 2017).

Patterns have emerged as details about the shooters become known. Ninety-five percent of the incidents have been committed by men, with many under the age of 30 (Fox and Levin 1998; Larkin 2018). Many of these shooters express a feeling of superiority, extending from their privileged status as men. Even if not superior in their displays of masculinity, they believe they can regain this through mass violence against "the enemy" or those whom they feel have wronged them. This is what Kalish and Kimmel (2010) describe as "aggrieved entitlement" where these perpetrators feel "wronged by the world" and transform that anger into revenge (454). Many of these mass shooters show degrees of "white entitlement," viewing Black people, Hispanics, and other minorities as inferior to themselves (Madfis 2014). For instance, the Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris discussed in personal recordings how women and Black, Latino, and gay people were inferior to them (Evans 2016:13). They saw themselves as being tormented and victimized by the "jocks," and yet they still saw themselves

as superior to minority groups. Even when they felt victimized by everyone else, they still had groups of people to maintain their superiority. Since white entitlement often protects white men from systemic disenfranchisement, these individuals are often unable to emotionally process everyday setbacks, like bullying, being passed over for a job, etc. (Wise 2005). When their privilege no longer guarantees them status or success, they are unable to cope and more likely to externalize blame for their outcomes.

Fox and Levin (1998) explore this externalization of blame in mass murderers, by providing a framework of commonalities. Their framework includes predisposers, precipitants, and facilitators. “Predisposers” include intropunitive aggression (aggression turned inward), frustration, and externalization of blame, all contributing to fantasies of vengeful murder (Fox and Levin 1998:438). “Precipitants” are events such as (threat of) losses of jobs and inspiration taken from other mass killers (439). “Facilitators” are the situational conditions that allow for violent outburst (441). Fox and Levin (1998) emphasize that few of those who have predisposers or precipitants will commit mass murder, and that only those in these situational conditions actually do so. Collins (2015) likewise argues that researchers cannot explain mass killings in terms of predispositions and precipitants: “The correlation of these predictors with rampage killings must be extremely low,” therefore resulting in many false positives (para. 34). He remains focused on the situational factors that these killers engineer with months of preparation, during which they amass arsenals, refine plans of surprise attack, and otherwise build up a sense of the emotional dominance that will allow them to commit such violence. Unlike the predispositions and precipitants noted by Fox and Levin (1998), such situations remain rare.

*Misogyny and violence against women.*

Mass shootings often start in the home: the majority of these cases (54%) are related to issues of domestic violence, resulting in familicide (Everytown for Gun Safety 2017; Messerschmidt 2017). On July 29, 1999, Mark Barton killed his wife and two children at home and then proceeded to open fire at two brokerage firms in Atlanta, GA, killing a total of twelve people and wounding twelve others (CNN 2018). This is the invisible pattern not discussed in mass shootings. Domestic violence is a key predisposer to mass violence that often goes ignored. Many shooters exhibit warning signs that should prevent them from purchasing guns like threats and/or acts of violence, violating protective orders, or ongoing substance abuse issues (Everytown for Gun Safety 2017). It is important to highlight this connection of men as perpetrators in gender-based violence as it contributes to a culture of male dominance and aggression.

In our society, a history of violence is common in cases of mass violence. In the case of the Sutherland Springs shooting, Devin Patrick Kelley was charged in a domestic violence dispute for assaulting his wife and child, and previously sent threatening texts to his mother-in-law (Hanna and Yan 2017). He exhibited many signs of violent and aggressive behavior against his family, and then committed a mass shooting resulting in twenty-five (and an unborn baby) killed and twenty wounded. The loss (or threat of loss) of a job or spouse, combined with a history of abuse and access to weapons, is part of a culture that enables mass murder. Though Collins (2015) and Fox and Levin (1998) point out that few men wind up creating the situations that allow them to kill, these men still contribute to a culture of violence and misogyny. The fact that familicide is the most common type of mass shooting is a pattern that needs to be

highlighted. Not only is violence against women a part of these mass shooting cases, but such cases contribute to a culture allowing it to occur.

Though mass shootings remain rare, gender-based violence in the U.S. is more widespread. Ninety-one percent of victims of reported rape are women; and, in eight out of ten rapes reported in the National Crime Victimization Survey, victims knew their perpetrators (NSVRC 2015). These statistics exhibit a societal issue with gender-based violence that many other nations also have. Our country, however, has greater access to deadly weapons that makes it easier to enact this violence (Global Firearms Holdings 2018).

The misogyny inherent in our culture is often enacted in these mass shootings. Before his 2014 shooting spree in Isla Vista, CA, Rodger was angry at women for not reciprocating his attempts to talk to them and would respond with violent outbursts. Larkin (2018:80) argues that, “Given hegemonic notions of masculinity, Rodger blamed women not only for his own victimization, but for his own inadequacies.” He perceived women as the “enemy,” where he was the victim, and in turn exacted his revenge fantasy against them. Rodger provides an example of misogyny used in mass shooters’ justifications for their crimes. This trend continues in school shootings where eight of the twelve perpetrators in Klein’s (2005) content analysis targeted girls because of rejection (or perceived rejection) or jealousy (Klein 2005; Klein and Chancer 2000). By being rejected, these boys feel pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity in other respects, like through acts of mass violence. Mass shootings are just one example of the consequences of male dominance attitudes, toxic masculinity, and a threat to gender identity.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION:**

### **Key Points from the Literature**

In the literature review I outlined the destructive nature of group dominance and misogyny in relation to masculinity threat, toxic masculinity, and mass shootings. Munsch and Willer (2012) found that men who are exposed to an identity threat were more likely to exonerate perpetrators of sexual assault than participants whose gender identities were not threatened. These men felt they needed to compensate for their perceived lack of masculinity by trying to support other men in the sexual assault scenario. Additionally, men who experience a threat to their ingroup membership may respond by turning to more extreme displays of aggression toward women (Dahl et al. 2015; Messerschmidt 2017). We see this in incel culture: the men feel they are not measuring up to the hegemonic masculine standards (either in physical appearance or sexual experience with women) so they conform through other means like an aggressive online persona. Men who celebrate mass shootings like the one committed by Rodger perpetuate a culture of violence against women, one that may also include access to guns and aggressive fantasies.

### **Restatement of the Research Problem**

This study is intended to understand the relationship between traits associated with the incel movement, masculinity threat, and gender role stress, and how these relate to attitudes towards guns, violence, and aggressive fantasies. There has been research on the “manosphere” and masculinity threat more broadly (Munsch and Willer 2012; Willer et al. 2013; Lilly 2016; Eisler et al. 2000; Ging 2017), while group position theory offers an explanation for group dominance attitudes in response to threat. By building on these literatures and theories, the

current study examines the relationship between masculinity and aggression. I propose the following hypotheses:

*Men who perceive the higher status gained by masculinity as being threatened (status threat) (1), who have greater stress in their masculine gender role (acceptance threat) (2), or who exhibit incel traits (3), will more positively endorse (a) the use of gun violence and aggression (b) and report more aggressive fantasies.*

## **METHODS:**

### **Sample**

This research project uses self-reported survey measures to research the correlation of incel traits with approval of guns, violence, and aggressive fantasies. My sampling frame is United States adult men aged 18 to 30 with access to Centiment, a website that recruits survey-takers via social media such as Facebook, sends notifications to users who fit the demographic criteria of a particular study, and pays them for participation. The survey was self-administered and accessed online through Centiment. Approximately 76.6% of those who completed the survey (N = 612) are white; 12.8% are Black; 7.8% are Asian; 3.3% are Hispanic; 0.65% are Native American; and 2.1% identified as multiracial or mixed race. The majority are (88.6%) heterosexual; with only 4.7% identified as gay; 5.4% as bisexual; and 0.82% as asexual. For the current study, I only include white men interested in women (heterosexual and bisexual) because this is consistent with what the profiles of incels and mass shooters: young, white men who feel betrayed or rejected by—and target—women (Messerschmidt 2017; Everytown for Gun Safety 2015). This leaves us with a sample of 439 white men aged 18 to 30 who are interested in women.

## Data Collection

### *Dependent variables.*

*Attitudes Towards Guns and Violence* (Shapiro, Dorman, Burkes, Welker, and Clough 1997): Attitudes Towards Guns and Violence (AGVQ) refers to the likelihood that respondents imagine themselves using violence and aggression in hypothetical situations. Shapiro et al. (1997) developed and tested their measure on persons under twenty because of the higher rate of violence in this age group (citing U.S. Department of Justice 1991). They measured gun use because guns increase lethality of aggressive behavior, because people under the age of 18 are not allowed to purchase handguns, and because gun ownership indicates a more serious level of aggression than other actions (fist fighting for example; 1997:312).

The AGVQ is a 23-item measure with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85. It has a 3-point Likert scale response ("agree," "not sure," "disagree") for each statement. For example, "If somebody insults you, and you don't want to be a chump, you have to fight" (See Appendix for full survey measure). Agreement with this statement indicates approval of the use of violence. This measure was chosen by the researchers because approval of violence may be seen as an attempt to overcompensate with overt hegemonic masculine traits like aggression and dominance when masculinity is threatened (Willer et al. 2013; Kupers 2005; Kalish and Kimmel 2012). Willer et al. (2013) found a stronger approval of the Iraq war (a state-endorsed act of violence) in respondents whose masculinity was threatened. I expect a similar response based on masculinity threat and the overcompensation thesis. Because the participants' responses to all 23 items were averaged into a single scale, OLS regression is used when predicting AGVQ.

*Aggressive Fantasies* (Rosenfeld, Huesmann, Eron, and Torney-Purta 1982; Nadel, Spellmann, Alvarez-Canino, Lausell-Bryant, and Landsberg 1996): Aggressive Fantasies refers

to daydreams of a violent or destructive nature. The Aggressive Fantasies measure was originally created by Rosenfeld et al. (1982) in a larger assessment tool called the Children's Fantasy Inventory, developed using psychoanalytic theory. Their goal was to evaluate the differences between age and gender of children's "imaginativeness and creativity in fantasy production" (1982:349). Nadel et al. (1996) later adapted the Aggressive Fantasies measure for school-based intervention and violence-prevention programs for youth. They use Aggressive Fantasies (along with other variables) to measure violence. It was chosen for this study because of its measure of imagined crimes like rape and murder. Collins (2015) finds that mass shooters often prepare for their attacks months beforehand by amassing arsenals and repeatedly imagining their acts. Imagining crimes like murder or rape are central to the issue of domination and control of others. These are also traits that are central to hegemonic masculinity (Kupers 2005).

Nadel et al.'s (1996) Aggressive Fantasies scale contains seven-items from the larger measurement tool. It has a 3-point Likert scale ("never," "a little," "a lot") for each statement. This scale has a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.83. Because participants' responses to all 7 items are averaged into a single scale, OLS regression is used when predicting Aggressive Fantasies.

#### *Independent variables.*

The independent variables include: Incel Traits, Masculine Gender Role Stress, and Threatened Masculinity. Both Masculine Gender Role Stress and Threatened Masculinity measure respondents' perceptions of gender-identity threat, particularly acceptance threat and status threat. The measurement of incel traits was constructed by the researchers. Masculine Gender Role Stress is unchanged from its original form. Threatened Masculinity is adapted from Willer et al. (2013) and Pew Research's American Values 2012 Survey.

*Incel Traits:* Incel Traits refers to the characteristics and emotions that journalists attribute to the incel movement using scaled descriptive words. This scale was created by the researcher and Dr. Kaitlin Boyle. To create a list of terms describing incel identity and traits, I did a small content analysis of Google News stories. I used the search term “incel movement” and selected the first eleven articles to analyze (one extra in case an article was off topic). I read through and noted every word that fit within two categories: incel traits/characteristics and emotions. Incel traits included terms like “misogyny,” “sexual frustration,” “lonely,” etc. Incel emotions included “anger,” “hatred,” and “resentment.” I collected the most common terms and collapsed similar terms into larger categories (“raw hatred” with “hatred,” “violent misogyny” with “misogyny,” etc.) This resulted in a list of thirty-one traits and emotions.

I then found antonyms for each word using an online thesaurus, and a few words were collapsed or discarded if they were too closely related to other terms or did not have a sufficient antonym (for example, “sexless”). This resulted in a final list of twenty-five pairs of words for the incel traits scale (see Appendix). Participants were presented with two opposing terms using a bipolar scale. For example, they were asked to rate themselves on scales from “paranoid” to “trusting,” or from “scorned” to “admired” (for full list of measures, see Appendix: Incel Trait measure). For the analysis, I averaged the individual items to create a single continuous measure. The Cronbach’s alpha for the Incel Traits scale is 0.93.

*Acceptance Threat:* The Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (Eisler and Skidmore 1987) was chosen to measure acceptance threat, which refers to men’s emotional struggle in trying to meet the socially constructed expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Stress in one’s gender role may lead men to overcompensate in traditionally masculine traits (Branscombe et al. 1999; Willer et al. 2013). The Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (MGRS) is described as: “men will

experience stress when they judge themselves unable to cope with the imperatives of the male role or when a situation is viewed as requiring ‘unmanly’ or feminine behavior” (Eisler and Skidmore 1987:125). This measure is based on the cognitive-behavioral concepts of stress and coping (123).

MGRS is a fifteen-item measure with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91. Respondents reply on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all stressful” to “extremely stressful.” It measures the extent to which respondents are stressed in their gender role, and likely to be violent or aggressive. Reidy, Berke, Gentile and Zeicher (2014) used this scale to measure “discrepancy stress” in men. This is a form of stress that arises when men either are, or perceive to be, insufficiently masculine (2). While Reidy et al. (2014) refer to this as “discrepancy stress,” it measures the feeling of threat when one does not fit in to their expected social group. In this project, it is referred to as “acceptance threat.”

*Status Threat:* Men who feel their ingroup’s value is being undermined will experience a status threat, as seen in Willer et al.’s (2013) study. Willer et al. (2013) use the term “threatened masculinity” to refer to the challenging (or perceived challenging) of male gender identity. However, only a narrowly defined display of masculinity is accepted. This requires men to threaten and put other men down in order to move up the hierarchy of power and status (Willer et al. 2013; Kimmel 1994). While Willer et al. (2013) used multiple questions to measure threat more broadly, we use his one question that ascertains status threat to men for our analyses: “Recent changes in our society often disadvantage men.” The response options are a 4-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Pew Research 2012 Values Survey).

*Control variables.*

The self-report survey starts with demographic information including race, age, sexual orientation, income, employment, political affiliation, political party, religiosity, internet use, and hostile and benevolent sexism. Because of the high rate of mass shootings stemming from incidents of intimate partner violence (Messerschmidt 2017; Everytown for Gun Safety 2015), hostile and benevolent sexism are included as control variables.

**RESULTS:**

**Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables**

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for White Men Interested in Women, n = 439**

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Age	25.04	3.77	18	30
Benevolent Sexism	3.16	0.57	1.36	4.55
Hostile Sexism	3.00	0.72	1	5
Independent Variables:				
Status Threat	2.47	0.83	1	4
Acceptance Threat	2.20	0.78	1	5
Incel Traits	2.86	1.30	0	8.56
Dependent Variables:				
Acceptance of Guns and Violence	1.74	0.37	1	3
Aggressive Fantasies	1.51	0.46	1	3

The average age of respondents was 25, which falls in between our age limit of 18 to 30-year-old men. With respect to education, almost half (49.2%) have a high school diploma, while 36.22% hold a bachelor’s or advanced degree, 10.93% an Associate degree, and 3.64% with less than a high school diploma.

For political party, 33.26% identified as Democrats (either “leaning,” “not very strong,” or “strong”) and 38.04% identified as Republicans (either “leaning,” “not very strong,” or “strong”). Only 28.70% of our sample identified as Independent. For political ideology, 31.66% identified as liberal (“very liberal,” “liberal,” and “somewhat liberal”), and 39.86% identified as

conservative (“very conservative,” “conservative,” and “somewhat conservative”). Finally, 28.47% of the sample identified as moderate.

The majority of the sample are employed (94.31%) either in part-time or full-time employment with half of them (41.46%) being full-time students. For annual income, there is a variation across categories. The most respondents (17.31%) report annual earnings of \$30,000 to \$39,999. There is a fairly even distribution of respondents’ income across categories with the next largest group of 15.49% in the \$0 to \$9,999 range. The smallest group is the \$80,000 to \$89,999 range with 1.82% of respondents.

**Table 2. Frequencies of Control Variables for White Men Interested in Women, n = 439**

Variables	Frequency	
	#	%
Education		
Less than High School Diploma	16	3.64
High School Diploma	216	49.20
Associate Degree	48	10.93
Bachelor's or Advanced Degree	159	36.22
Income		
\$0 - \$9,999	68	15.49
\$10,000 - \$19,999	24	5.47
\$20,000 - \$29,999	50	11.39
\$30,000 - \$39,999	76	17.31
\$40,000 - \$49,999	50	11.39
\$50,000 - \$59,999	53	12.07
\$60,000 - \$69,999	31	7.06
\$70,000 - \$79,999	21	4.78
\$80,000 - \$89,999	8	1.82
\$90,000 - \$99,999	19	4.33
\$100,000+	39	8.88
Political Party		
Democrat	146	33.26
Republican	167	38.04
Independent	126	28.70
Political Ideology		
Liberal	139	31.66
Conservative	175	39.86
Moderate	125	28.47
Currently Employed	414	94.31
Current Student	182	41.46

## Correlation Matrix

**Table 3. Pearson's Correlation Matrix for Key Study Variables, n = 439**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Incel Traits	1.000								
2. Acceptance Threat	.244*	1.000							
3. Status Threat	.189*	.344*	1.000						
4. Benevolent Sexism	-.096*	.196*	.131*	1.000					
5. Hostile Sexism	.107*	.378*	.546*	.265*	1.000				
6. Degree	-.038	.112*	.026	-.078	-.114*	1.000			
7. Conservative	-.034	.123*	.224*	.203*	.240*	-.037	1.000		
8. Republican	-.041	.090	.197*	.187*	.222*	-.052	.637*	1.000	
9. Income	-.106*	.178*	.099*	.076	.005	.522*	-.009	.017	1.000
10. Age	-.026	-.092	-.055	-.028	-.157*	.362*	-.119*	-.044	.352*

\* $p < .05$

To assess bivariate relationships, I present a Pearson's correlation matrix in Table 3.

There are multiple statistically significant correlations at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Incel traits is positively related to both independent variables, acceptance threat ( $r = 0.244$ ) and status threat ( $r = 0.189$ ), and hostile sexism ( $r = 0.107$ ). Status threat is positively related to hostile sexism ( $r = 0.546$ ). Acceptance threat is positively related to status threat ( $r = 0.344$ ) and hostile sexism ( $r = 0.378$ ). Degree is positively related to income ( $r = 0.522$ ) and age ( $r = 0.362$ ). Conservatism is positively related to Republican party identity ( $r = 0.637$ ). Finally, income is positively related to age ( $r = 0.352$ ). To summarize, incel traits, acceptance threat, and status threat are statistically significantly correlated with each other, in addition to the control variable, hostile sexism at a  $p$ -level of 0.05.

## OLS Regressions

**Table 4. Standardized Coefficients from OLS Regression for Variables Predicting Attitudes Towards Guns and Violence and Aggressive Fantasies, n = 439**

	Model 1: Attitudes Towards Guns and Violence	Model 2: Aggressive Fantasies <sup>a</sup>
Degree	-.006	-.002
Conservative	-.076	.038
Republican	-.074	-.077
Income	.010	.010
Age	.001	-.006
Status Threat	.047*	.044
Acceptance Threat	.173*	.135*
Incel Traits	.010	.093*
Benevolent Sexism	.025	.049
Hostile Sexism	.025	.017
Constant	1.071	.756
F-statistic	12.67	11.66
R <sup>2</sup>	.228	.214

\*p < .05

In Table 4, Model 1 shows that 22.8% of the variance of attitudes towards guns and violence is explained by the independent and control variables included in the model. The relationship between AGVQ and both acceptance threat ( $\beta = 0.173$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and status threat ( $\beta = 0.047$ ;  $p < .05$ ) are positive and statistically significant. With a one unit increase in feelings of status threat, there is a 0.047 increase in positive attitudes towards guns and violence. With a one unit increase in feelings of acceptance threat, there is a 0.173 increase in positive attitudes towards guns and violence. This means that when a respondent reports stronger feelings of group

<sup>a</sup> The Aggressive Fantasies scale contains seven items, two of which were irrelevant to the topic of this study (fantasizing about running away, and doing something “real bad” in school). However, after creating a separate subscale without these two questions and running the regression, there was little difference to the above model. The above Model 2 contains the full Aggressive Fantasies scale. Full tables upon request.

threat or more stress in their gender role, they respond with more positive attitudes towards guns and violence.

In Model 2, the independent and control variables explain 21.4% of the variance in the dependent variable, aggressive fantasies. The acceptance threat measure ( $\beta = .135$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and incel traits ( $\beta = .093$ ;  $p < .05$ ) are the only statistically significant variables in Model 2. With a one unit increase in respondents' feelings of acceptance threat, there is a 0.135 increase in aggressive fantasies. And with a one unit increase in incel traits, there is a 0.093 increase in aggressive fantasies. When a respondent experiences gender role stress or shares incel traits, he reports more frequent aggressive fantasies than respondents who do not experience acceptance threat or share incel traits.

### **KEY FINDINGS:**

Findings support three of the six hypotheses: (1a) Men who perceive the greater status accorded masculinity as threatened (status threat) will express a stronger approval of gun violence and aggression; (2a) men who have greater stress in their masculine gender role (acceptance threat) will express stronger approval of gun violence and aggression, and (2b) will more strongly endorse aggressive fantasies; and (3b) men who score higher on the incel traits scale will more strongly endorse aggressive fantasies.

### **Hypothesis 1a: Status Threat and AGVQ**

The first supported hypothesis is that men who believe masculinity is under threat in society have a stronger approval of guns and violence. This is to be expected based on Willer et al.'s (2013) findings that men who felt social changes were threatening men expressed greater support for war, pro-dominance attitudes, belief in male superiority, and homophobia (1001). Men who believe that the status of men is under threat overcompensate, and this is what was

found in the results as well. Men who hold status threat beliefs approved the use of guns and violence more than men in the study who did not feel masculinity was under threat. This supports Hypothesis 1a.

While status threat captures the idea that masculinity as a whole is under attack, it is experienced on an individual level. Men as a whole do not believe masculinity is threatened (though one could argue that groups like incels and men's rights groups share this belief). Instead, individual men are experiencing status threat and taking it upon themselves to respond with hyper-conformity to hegemonic masculinity. While aggressive fantasies are a personal, internal experience, positive attitudes towards guns and violence allow for a projection of traditional masculinity. For example, agreement with the statement, "You've got to fight to show people you're not a wimp," implies conformity with hegemonic masculinity. To be a man, you need to be "tough," "aggressive," and "in control" (Bird 1996; Kupers 2005; Harris 2010; Harris et al. 2011; Dahl et al. 2015). This statement, and many others from the survey, demonstrate these traits of hegemonic masculinity.

While the Aggressive Fantasies scale was not statistically significantly correlated with masculinity threat as expected, it may reflect an outward projection of masculinity in response to status threat. Aggressive fantasies imply internal justification of one's masculinity that others do not necessarily need to see. However, status threat is the result of outside threats from subordinate groups. If they "threaten" masculinity by doubting its superior social status, threatened men may feel the need to display hegemonic masculine traits to prove its dominance. By posturing and projecting masculinity as superior, men combat the threat posed by others. This process may be different than that of an acceptance threat, which is discussed below in

Hypotheses 2a and 2b. However, I cannot dismiss the possibility of data limitations as an explanation for this lack of significance.

### **Hypotheses 2a and 2b: Acceptance Threat, AGVQ, and Aggressive Fantasies**

Acceptance threat is significantly related to attitudes towards guns and violence and aggressive fantasies, which supports my second hypothesis. Eisler et al. (2000) used the same scale for masculine gender role stress and found that men who reported higher stress were angrier than men who reported low stress, endorsed more verbal and physical aggression, and found women's assertiveness threatening to their power and control (34-35). My findings support this: respondents who felt they were not measuring up to hegemonic masculine standards indicated a willingness to gain control or compensate through violence or aggressive attitudes.

Like Willer et al. (2013), I found threatened men endorse the use of violence. However, their study (using the masculinity threat measure) measured status threat. The positive relationship with acceptance threat, a threat to their ingroup membership, in addition to status threat, indicates that men may respond to threats through outward projections of hegemonic masculinity. By responding positively to attitudes towards guns and violence, respondents indicate an approval of aggression and dominance attitudes that are typically associated with hegemonic masculinity. Both types of threat involve an outward projection of these traits: "It would make me feel really powerful to hold a loaded gun in my hand." It is not simply about trying to overcome the threat, but rather projecting an image of dominance in order to counter the fear resulting from the threat. For respondents, agreement with this statement is a means of reasserting power and control. This outward projection of masculinity is critical to conformity in

hegemonic masculinity, as we see in the literature (Harris 2010; Harris et al. 2011; Heinrich 2012).

Furthermore, these findings suggest internal gender role stress is possibly more toxic than just the experience of an outside threat as seen in status threats. Acceptance threat correlates to both outward displays of violence and aggression, and internal fantasies of aggression. The overt agreement with statements on guns and violence may reveal more internally aggressive men than those who do not experience masculine gender role stress in the form of acceptance threat. Alternatively, threatened men could simply be projecting an image of hyper-conformity to ingroup norms as a means to appear more masculine. Both are possible explanations for respondents' higher scores on the AGVQ and Aggressive Fantasies scales.

### **Hypothesis 3b: Incel Traits and Aggressive Fantasies**

Finally, my findings support the third hypothesis about the positive and statistically significant relationship between incel traits and aggressive fantasies. These findings fall in line with literature on the incel movement. In these communities, men write about women in derogatory, objectified ways, to the point of celebrating the rape and murder of women. We see this in the celebration of Elliot Rodger, where community members herald him the “Supreme Gentleman” and buy his favorite latte on the anniversary of his mass shooting (Spampinato 2018). Digital media have allowed us to interact quickly and regularly with many people far away, nursing fantasies of violence, while separating ourselves from having to view it in person. A majority of those online are not acting on these specific fantasies (as we see in the rarity of

mass shootings), but they still can express this aggression in other ways that can still contribute to a toxic masculine culture that is harmful to women.

The incel traits scale was an original measure that explores the emotions and traits associated with incels. This captures a feeling of loneliness, dejection, anger, bitterness, etc. (see Appendix A: Incel Traits for full measure). These emotions can extend beyond the incel movement for anyone who feels ostracized in our society. This is what this study could be capturing in the findings: respondents who feel rejected and lonely in turn process that into anger and resentment towards others. Often this anger is scapegoated in the harassment and treatment of women, either online or in real life. While I am not measuring externalization of blame directly, the connection to Fox and Levin's (1998) framework is possible. By scoring higher on the Incel Traits scale, respondents report feeling more of this shared dejection than others. They possibly channel these feelings into aggression in their imagination as a means of escape. We cannot know for sure if these men identify as "incels," but it is worth exploring in a future study about this connection between feelings of dejection, loneliness, and bitterness among those who do self-identify as incels.

## **DISCUSSION:**

Conceptualizing how masculinity threat relates to aggressive attitudes is important to understanding the impacts of toxic masculinity. Previous studies have found that, when threatened, men will overcompensate with hegemonic masculinity, which encourages aggression, violence, toughness and a lack of empathy (Willer et al. 2013; Dahl et al. 2015; Eisler et al. 2000). This study further examines this overcompensation in relation to incel traits, where women are objectified as biologically inferior to men (Ging 2017). The misogyny expressed in the incel movement appears to be rooted in fears of threat from women, social liberalism, gender

equality, and not fitting into the hegemonic masculine gender role. This study analyzes how status and acceptance threat (measured through Masculinity Threat and the Masculine Gender Role Stress scale) correspond with aggression as seen in the incel movement.

Reviewing the study's findings, it was surprising that the significance between variables was mixed. I expected the dependent variables—Aggressive Fantasies and AGVQ—to be more related. However, only one of our independent variables (acceptance threat) was significant for both dependent variables. Even though there were bivariate relationships with the control variables (as seen in Table 2), many of them were weak correlations. This may explain why none were significant in the regression models. However, it is important to note that benevolent and hostile sexism are included in the control variables. These findings are not motivated by sexism, but rather perceptions of threat and identification with incel traits.

Further research is needed to examine why differences in threat—acceptance versus status threat—may result in different reactions from respondents. I expected each threat to be positively associated with aggression, but I did not expect different types of threat to be associated with different types of aggression. The difference in the location of the threat (either internal or external) may result in differences in the overcompensation response. Respondents who experience a status threat (measured by Masculinity Threat) may feel the need to project their masculinity outwards by agreeing to statements of gun use and violence. This allows others to know the ingroup is impervious to threats. Respondents who experience an acceptance threat (measured by Masculine Gender Role Stress) may feel the need to both prove their masculinity to others and themselves. This can be done by internalizing aggression, as seen in Aggressive Fantasies, or posturing an image of toughness through gun use and violence, as seen in AGVQ.

Both independent variables on threat require more research to fully understand the differences in threat responses.

Taken together, these findings suggest that masculinity threat is positively correlated with men's aggressive attitudes toward women. Similar to findings in Willer et al.'s (2013) and Eisler et al.'s (2000) research, men overcompensate when experiencing a threat, either status or acceptance. While we did not induce a gender identity threat as an experiment in this study, we can see a significant association between men who feel threatened or stressed in their gender role and positive attitudes towards guns and violence.

Furthermore, the finding that men who share incel traits take part in more frequent aggressive fantasies reflects a culture of toxic masculinity as a result of insecurity and a lack of control or power. Men who feel lonely, dejected or bitter may channel this into aggressive thoughts without directly acting upon such thoughts. However, as we see in the incel forums, aggressive and misogynistic beliefs can be shared for others to further reinforce. This connection to incel identity needs to be explored more in future research.

#### **LIMITATIONS:**

This thesis has several limitations. The measure for incel traits was created by analyzing media reports for the search term "incel movement" in Google news. Using terms for traits and emotions from the members themselves would provide a more accurate representation of the incel identity as they see themselves. However, gaining access to these groups would require me to disguise myself as a member, resulting in deception that requires a more timely investment. Through the media content analysis, I still managed to use a systematic process to locate traits, actions, emotions, settings, and social identities of the incel community as identified by journalists who report on it, often using shooters' and incels' own words. Furthermore, this scale

did have a high Cronbach's alpha score of 0.93, demonstrating each question worked well together.

Another limitation with our incel traits measure is that respondents will not see the term "incel" in the survey and therefore will not have the option to identify as an incel or not. I do this because, as a result of the social stigma on incels, I would not reasonably expect respondents to answer truthfully to questions about that identity, and it could potentially result in them not taking the survey if they saw the word. The purpose of this research is to see to what extent men who may not identify with the incel community share many of the same traits. This research is not claiming to study incels and their identity, but rather the attributes associated with the movement.

Additionally, the analysis itself is only measuring white men interested in women. This limits applicability to other populations because it is not representative of other racial groups, sexual orientations, etc. I chose this specific subsample because of the trends seen in mass shooters and those expected to experience threat (Fox and Levin 1998; Wise 2005). White men are at the top of the social hierarchy and have the most to lose if there was a challenge to that hierarchy (Wise 2005; Madfis 2014). Previous studies have already compared threat responses between men and women, and found that threatened women did not overcompensate with more feminine characteristics associated with hegemonic femininity or exonerate perpetrators and condemn victims like the men (see Munsch and Willer 2012; Willer et al. 2013).

Finally, use of cross-sectional data (collected at one time) raises the possibility of reverse causation. We do not know if the independent variable is actually causing the change in the dependent variable, or the other way around. However, even though these are cross-sectional data, it is unlikely that aggressive fantasies or positive attitudes towards guns and violence would

make a respondent feel threatened, either in their masculine gender role or about men's status as a whole. For example, respondents who have aggressive fantasies would not feel threatened as a result of their fantasies. This is not the direction the study expected to find, and therefore, our independent and dependent variables were chosen accordingly.

## **CONCLUSION:**

This research is important for understanding toxic masculinity and reactions based on perceived threats. While findings were mixed, they suggest that men who experience acceptance threat are more likely to have aggressive fantasies and endorse the use of guns and violence. Further, men who experience status threat are more likely to have positive attitudes towards guns and violence and men who share incel traits experience more frequent aggressive fantasies. This advances the research on masculinity threat by looking at how it correlates with incel traits. While developing the incel traits scale, I found that incels may not feel fully accepted as men (compared to the "Chads") and perceive threats to this status from outsiders like women and minorities. They bring to the forefront issues of toxic masculinity and masculinity threat that have previously not been quantitatively studied. These findings help to provide the academic community with new insights into how these traits are correlated with issues of aggressive fantasies and gender role stress.

This research is essential because incels exemplify male dominance attitudes and toxic masculinity in our society. While this study did not assess membership in the incel community, it aims to better understand the relationship between toxic masculinity, identity threat and attitudes towards guns, violence, and aggressive thoughts. With the mass violence in Isla Vista, Toronto, and Tallahassee in recent years, research on the connection between masculinity threat and violence is as important as ever. The celebration of this violence in the incel community

demands further attention on the part of researchers, media, and policymakers. This study starts to uncover the problem, but there is more that needs to be done.

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## **APPENDIX A: MEASURES**

### **Hostile Sexism**

(5-point, “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”)

1. Women exaggerate problems at work
2. Women are too easily offended
3. Most women interpret innocent remarks as sexist
4. When women lose fairly, they claim discrimination
5. Women seek special favors under guise of equality
6. Feminists are making reasonable demands
7. Feminists not seeking more power than men
8. Women seek power by gaining control of men
9. Few women tease men sexually
10. Once a man commits, she puts him on a tight leash
11. Women fail to appreciate all men do for them

### **Benevolent Sexism**

(5-point, “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”)

Protective Paternalism:

1. A good woman should be set on a pedestal
2. Women should be cherished and protected by men
3. Men should sacrifice to provide for women
4. In a disaster, women need not be rescued first

Complementary Gender Differentiation:

1. Women have a superior moral sensibility
2. Women have a quality of purity few men possess
3. Women have a more refined sense of culture, taste

Heterosexual Intimacy:

1. Every man ought to have a woman he adores
2. Men are complete without women
3. Despite accomplishment, men are incomplete without women
4. People are often happy without heterosexual romance

## **INDEPENDENT VARIABLES**

### **Incel Traits:**

**Slide the scale to indicate which word describes you better.**

- |              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
| 1. assertive | not confident |
| 2. hostile   | agreeable     |
| 3. clueless  | knowledgeable |

4. confused	certain
5. disgust	delight
6. enraged	calm
7. Excluded	included
8. fearful	bold
9. Frustrated	fulfilled
10. hateful	loving
11. insecure	secure
12. masculine	feminine
13. paranoid	trusting
14. rejected	accepted
15. resentful	forgiving
16. sad	happy
17. scorned	admired
18. defeated	successful
19. pitiful	praiseworthy
20. shunned	embraced
21. superior	inferior
22. unattractive	attractive
23. vengeful	merciful
24. violent	non-violent
25. weak	strong

**Acceptance Threat:**

(5-point, “not at all stressful” to “extremely stressful”)

1. Being outperformed at work by a woman.
2. Letting a woman control the situation.
3. Being perceived by someone as “gay.”
4. Being married to someone who makes more money than you.
5. Losing in a sports competition.
6. Admitting that you are afraid of something.
7. Being with a woman who is more successful than you.
8. Being perceived as having feminine traits.
9. Having your children see you cry.
10. Being outperformed in a game by a woman.
11. Having people say that you are indecisive.
12. Appearing less athletic than a friend.
13. Having others say that you are too emotional.
14. Being compared unfavorably to other men.
15. Getting passed over for a promotion.

**Status Threat:**

(4-point, “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”)

1. Recent changes in our society often disadvantage men.

## **DEPENDENT VARIABLES**

### **Attitudes Toward Guns and Violence:**

(3-point, “agree,” “not sure,” “disagree”)

1. You’ve got to fight to show people you’re not a wimp.
2. If someone disrespects me, I have to fight them to get my pride back.
3. Carrying a gun makes people feel safe.
4. Carrying a gun makes people feel powerful and strong.
5. If people are nice to me I’ll be nice to them, but if someone stops me from getting what I want, they’ll pay for it bad.
6. I’d like to have a gun so that people would look up to me.
7. It would be exciting to hold a loaded gun in my hand.
8. I wish there weren’t any guns in my neighborhood.
9. I bet it would feel real cool to walk down the street with a gun in my pocket.
10. I’d feel awful inside if someone laughed at me and I didn’t fight them.
11. It would make me feel really powerful to hold a loaded gun in my hand.
12. Most people feel nervous around someone with a gun and they want to get away from that person.
13. The people I respect would never go around with a gun because they’re against hurting people.
14. I think it would be fun to play around with a real gun.
15. If someone insults me or my family, it really bothers me, but if I beat them up, that makes me feel better.
16. If somebody insults you, and you don’t want to be a chump, you have to fight.
17. I don’t like people who have guns because they might kill someone.
18. A kid who doesn’t get even with someone who makes fun of him is a sucker.
19. Belonging to a gang makes kids feel safe because they’ve got people to back them up.
20. If I acted the way teachers think I should out on the street, people would think I was weak and I’d get pushed around.
21. I wish everyone would get rid of all their guns.
22. I don’t like being around people with guns because someone could end up getting hurt.
23. Kids in gangs feel like they’re part of something powerful.

### **Aggressive Fantasies:**

(3-point, “never,” “a little,” “a lot”)

1. When you get mad, do you sometimes imagine hitting or hurting the other person?
2. Do you sometimes imagine or daydream about what would happen if you did something real bad in school, or got arrested for something, even when this did not really happen?
3. Do you sometimes imagine or have daydreams about hitting or hurting somebody that you don’t like?

4. Do you sometimes have daydreams or nightmares about running away from someone who is trying to catch you and hurt you, or do something bad to you?
5. Do you sometimes imagine or daydream about using powerful weapons to destroy your enemies?
6. Do you sometimes daydream or imagine rape scenes, or forcing someone to have sex?
7. Do you ever daydream about people getting killed?